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ABSTRACT

The rationale for conducting programs for the adult women who are seeking an "educational course of action" is based on the discontinuities in life styles experienced by women which make it extremely difficult and frustrating for them to contribute their talents to society. Personal characteristics of the women in a non-credit exploration course included: (1) average age of 40; (2) most were married and had children. The most significant change of interests before and after enrolling occurred with the group of women who, upon entering the course, were undecided as to their goals. The adult woman's academic achievement was noticeable above that of typically aged undergraduates. The counseling conducted with these women was reality-based. Several stages were readily apparent: (1) readiness stage; (2) the exploration stage; (3) the action stage. The broader program at Ohio State University consists of more than described above. Basically, a pre-admission service is provided, supportive services for enrolled women is given, and counseling for typically aged students is available to inform them on changing life styles of women. (KJ)

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Returning Adult Women Students: Pre and Post-
Counseling Attitudes and Plans

Presented by

Carol A. Fought

For the American Personnel and
Guidance Association Conference

March 24, 1970

New Orleans

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The first formal programs of continuing education for women were established in the early 1960's, and since that time adult women have returned to the college campus in increasing numbers. Each of the pioneer programs, as well as those to follow, have been as varied as their parent institutions and their funding sources. But, the common denominator has been assistance at a prime time of motivation to adult women who are seeking an "educational course of action" or who are re-examining their "next step" in life.

The rationale for conducting these programs is based on the discontinuities in life styles experienced by women which makes it extremely difficult and frustrating for them to contribute their talents to society. Many having just completed their basic career preparation become housewives and mothers for a period of years. When the youngest child enters school and the home responsibilities gradually slacken with each year of the children's age, many women begin to investigate their need for self-fulfillment and identity.

This investigation is often undertaken with little or no direction, a "hit-or-miss" fashion, ending many times in frustration. The American woman's forerunners have been kind enough to fight and earn her equal rights and opportunities, but she is now left with a multitude of choices and thus needs a system of assistance whereby she can choose between them.

The employment market, the college picture and even the requirements for her previous field of study have greatly changed while she was absorbed with home responsibilities. With the exception of a one day conference or newspaper

articles she has given little time or thought to keeping up with changes in the outside world. In desiring to return to the professional world, she finds she no longer has the required skills, her once adequate skills are in need of updating or her interests have so completely changed that she no longer desires to return to her former field of training.

Women in the Columbus area have an additional problem. Their main source of higher education is a large institution where it is extremely difficult to know the right person to speak with or just where to begin to gain information. Also, much false information has been circulated and is accepted as truth without further checking. The disheartening fact is that the resources and opportunities are available on the campus, but without direction the women cannot avail themselves of these.

The need for assistance in educational goal development was strongly highlighted in the 1963 Ohio State University Alumnae Council study of 1,942 women in the Columbus area as to their continuing education interests.(1) It was ascertained through a questionnaire survey that 80 per cent of the women indicated an interest in continuing their education, 43 per cent on a credit basis, 31.4 per cent non-credit courses, and 9.8 per cent indicated both credit and non-credit courses. It was hypothesized that the approximately one-third who indicated a preference for non-credit courses did so due to their apprehension about plunging into credit courses after a long interim of time away from formal academic involvement, and lack of a particular educational or vocational goal. The majority (85.4 per cent) of the women surveyed felt that the University had a responsibility for providing counseling services for adult returning students, while 86.7 per cent felt that the University should provide continuing education programs for women.

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

Consequently, during Spring Quarter, 1968; Fall Quarter, 1968, and Fall

Quarter, 1969, we offered a non-credit exploration course through the Division of Continuing Education which assisted 83 adult women with their search for an educational goal. Each of these courses varied slightly depending upon the interest and composition of the particular group of women; however, the first and latter two seminars differed basically in content and purpose.

The first course was titled "Career and Life Goal Planning," and was advertised as a non-credit course for the young-mature woman who is considering a return to education or employment but who is undecided on career or educational goals. In an effort to keep the class and level of exploration homogeneous, all women who had completed a college degree were screened from admission to the class. For this particular workshop, I presented only the educational focus meetings, and then offered individual counseling to those who later found they were definitely interested in registering for credit courses at the University. We later discovered that the educational level was quite high with 33 per cent of the class obtaining counseling and later registering at the University, so that the latter two courses were designed and advertised totally for the exploration of educational goals.

Also, the women in the first class were not seen individually for counseling except as members followed up the invitations of various speakers for the class. These women were all administered the same battery of tests consisting of The Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Allport-Vernon Study of Values, Strong Vocational Interest Blank, and The School and College Ability Test (SCAT), with a group interpretation at a later class session.

Our second and third courses were geared totally to the adult woman who felt further education might be the answer she was seeking, and they were titled "Exploration of College Degree Programs for Adult Women," and "Educational Opportunities for Adult Women." They were described in the catalogue as

....a course designed for those who are interested in pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree program. The content will help women to

evaluate their own abilities and interests against the background of the college of today and changes in career fields. Various opportunities for continued education at the college level in the Columbus area will be explored with specific reference to the programs and opportunities available at The Ohio State University

The main emphasis of this course will be individual assistance to the returning woman student. A counseling session with the instructor will be required of each enrollee. Opportunities for testing and vocational guidance will be provided as well as assistance with individual research projects on careers suitable for adult women.

The enrollment of the classes was limited to 30, and at the end of each registration period there was a waiting list. The first time the class was offered, it was ten weeks in length, meeting once a week for two hour sessions. For the second offering the meetings were reduced to five two hour meetings, with the material and topics being condensed. For example, the sessions on "How to Study" were withdrawn and offered as a separate follow-up class, and the trends in women's careers and home management sessions were eliminated. Unfortunately, much of the group discussion time and opportunity to compare experiences and learning was lost in the shortening of the course, but more emphasis was placed on the individual counseling.

One additional change between the two educational courses was the time they were offered. The first class was scheduled during the morning from 9:30 to 11:30 A.M., which offered many of the women an opportunity to stay on the campus for lunch together, and do some library research later in the afternoon. The second class was scheduled in the evening, and actually had all the symptoms of an evening college class, with the women coming and leaving campus with little or no involvement with the campus. Interestingly enough, it drew a totally different population of women, more who were employed, with the majority in secretarial and clerical positions, and a much higher level of educational attainment, with 14 women already having earned the bachelors degree, and three having gone on to graduate degree work.

Regardless of the differences in composition of the two groups, the

courses were designed as close to an actual simulation of a college course experience as possible. A research paper on a career interest was required, and it was most interesting to observe the commitment and serious undertaking of this project particularly in view of the lack of a grade reward. A certificate was available upon completion of the course, if requested by the woman, and this was based solely upon attendance records, a policy of the Division of Continuing Education.

The sixty women were seen for individual counseling sessions, and on the basis of this, the need for testing and more in-depth vocational counseling was assessed, followed by a referral to the particular specialist in the University Counseling Center. From this a series of three sessions were held, including in-take, testing and interpretation.

Speakers for the classes were drawn from the University community. Faculty members presented their respective areas of study with particular reference to suitability for adult women, academic requirements, and employment opportunities upon graduation, with emphasis on the Columbus area since the majority of these women are "Columbus bound" following graduation. Various administrators spoke on the admission, orientation and testing policies and procedures of the University. Women currently employed in professional positions attended each session to act as resources on job realities.

The most popular presentation with all three classes was the panel of adult women students who were proving "It Can Be Done." This presentation is particularly effective when women from varying backgrounds and educational levels are included, and particularly when you use a woman who has 6 children, is the only one in her family to have ever attended college, and who has gone part-time for four years to complete her freshman year with a cumulative point hour of 3.35.

So as not to keep the women's educational sights focused only on the

large institution, a panel of administrators from five smaller local colleges, universities, and a technical school presented material on their school's resources, programs, and attitudes toward adult students. Curriculum, catalogues, and admission material were distributed, as well as the names of contact persons for the women's first visit to their campus. This was well received from the interest standpoint, perhaps more for sons and daughters than for the adult women themselves, as the cost of the three private schools was prohibitive on a family budget, especially where mother's education was concerned. However, in one situation the private college did have the corner on the market with one of its programs, a certification program in library science, one which Ohio State does not offer, but is now in the planning stages. (A more detailed outline of course and topics included is available from my office).

II. PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CLASS MEMBERS

The average age was 40 years, with the range from 25 to 61 (Figure 1, page 7). Eighty-three per cent of the women were married, 9 per cent divorced or separated, 4 per cent widowed, and 4 per cent single. The group of 83 women averaged 2.5 children.

All the enrollees were high school graduates, 25 per cent were college graduates, with 12 per cent having graduate work. Thirty-nine per cent had one year of formal education beyond high school, while twenty per cent never continued their education beyond the high school level (Figure 2, page 7). The average length of time since previous formal education was 20 years, the range being from one currently enrolled graduate student to a woman who had been away from formal education for 40 years.

It was interesting to note that only 14 women indicated on the pre-course questionnaire that they were enrolling in the course to gain confidence for

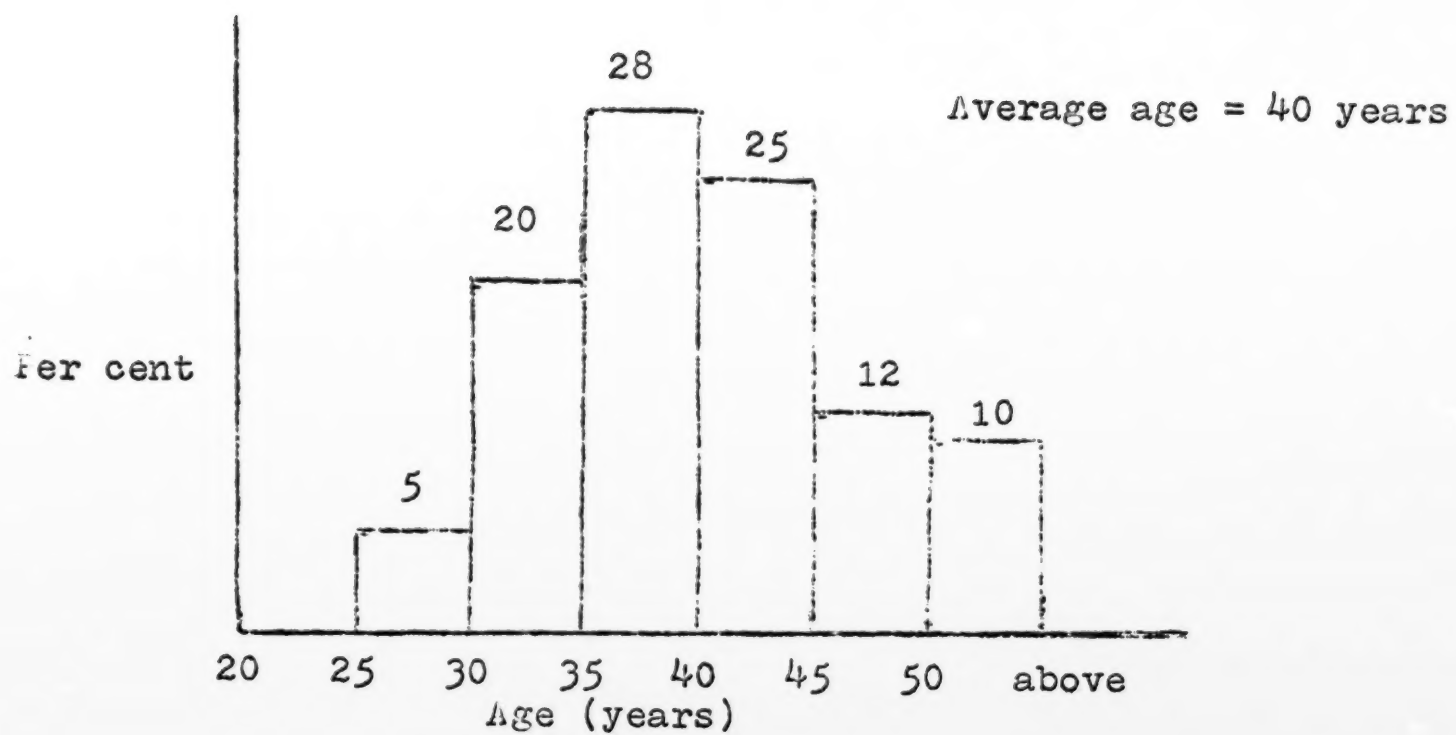


FIGURE 1
AGE DISTRIBUTION OF CLASS MEMBERS

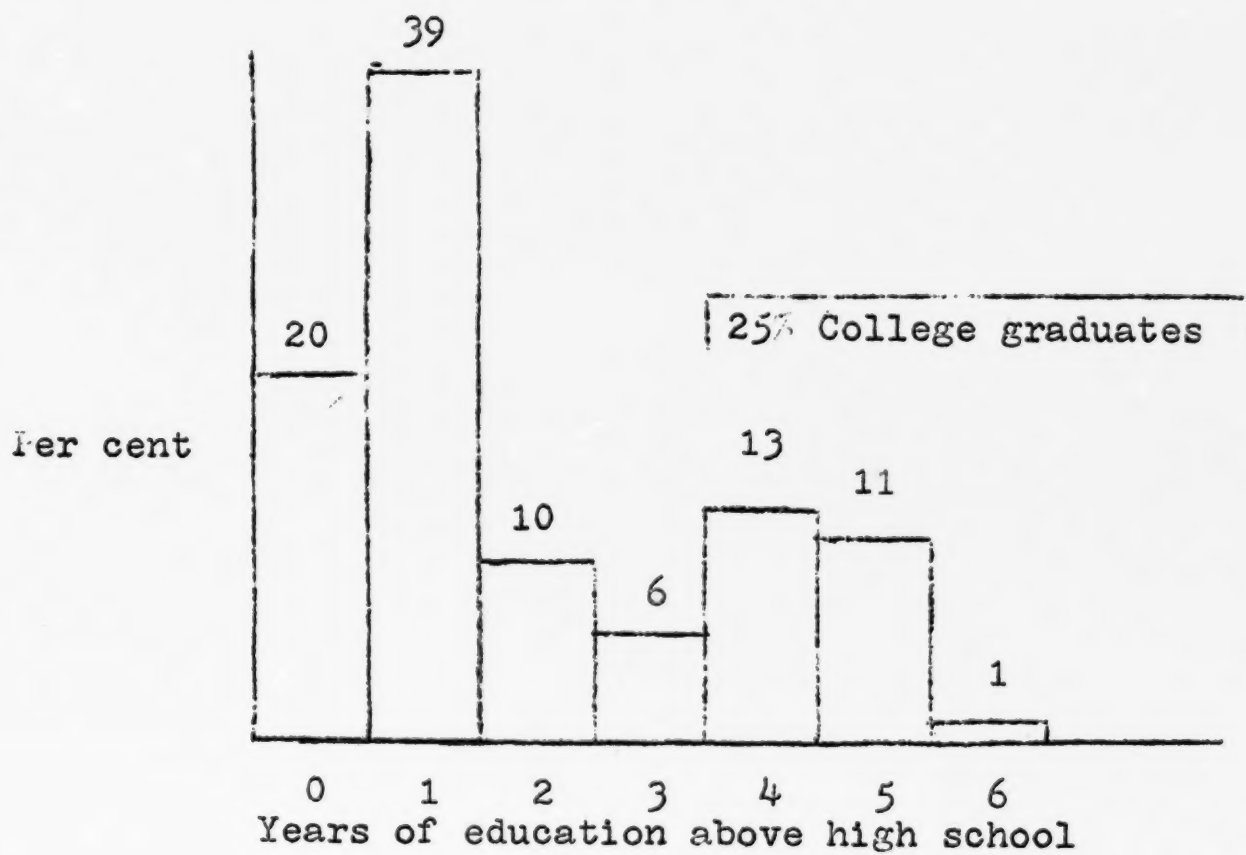


FIGURE 2
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF CLASS PARTICIPANTS

beginning or completing a degree program, with the remainder stating that they needed career or academic guidance. Yet in the counseling sessions, everyone of the women indicated apprehension as to their ability to cope with an academic commitment.

III. PRE-POST CLASS CHANGES IN EDUCATIONAL-CAREER ATTITUDES AND PLANS

Career interests before and after enrolling. As noted on Table I, page 9, prior to the course there was a wide range of interests indicated. The expressed interest after the course was determined from the topic chosen for the research paper, and checked with the responses listed on the questionnaire administered following the course. The areas of significant change include an increase of interest in library science, nursing and student personnel careers; decrease of interest in business and the arts and sciences.

These changes can all be directly related to presentations or discussions in class, i.e., the discovery that a library science curriculum was in the offering at Ohio State within the next two years, thus women felt secure in beginning a degree and completing basic requirements prior to the initiation of this program, and also due to the discovery of a similar program at another school within commuting distance.

Potential business majors were discouraged due to the discovery that the College of Administrative Sciences is extremely quantitatively oriented. It goes without saying that the majority of these women had been out of contact with math and were pre-conditioned at an earlier age that it was un-feminine to be good in math. The employment reality of low status for women in business careers, and the lack of contact with people and service oriented positions also influenced this decision.

In general, the decline in the arts and science fields may reflect a more specific selection of a career area, such as psychology, communications,

TABLE I
CAREER INTERESTS BEFORE AND AFTER
CLASS EXPERIENCE

CAREER AREA	INTEREST PRIOR TO COURSE (%)	INTEREST AFTER COURSE (%)
Education	31	40
Library Science	5	14 *
Business	7	2 *
Psychology	10	9
Social Work	7	5
Home Economics	8	7
Arts and Sciences	26	2 *
Communications	2	9 *
Medicine	1	0
Medical Dietetics	1	2
Nursing	0	5 *
Student Personnel	2	5
None listed	2	0

* Denotes significant change

or relating an area of interest to education, versus an arts degree which would entail a masters or Ph.D. commitment for employment security.

The interest in student personnel areas resulted from the discovery that to become a public school counselor required a teaching certificate, and many of the women were not positive toward this requirement for state certification. Instead several opted to enter the counseling field as college academic counselors. The increase of interest in the nursing field resulted mainly from the excellent presentation by the faculty members of this department. They could have sold anyone on this career, plus the fact they also made it very clear that adult women were welcome and it was possible for them to handle the collegiate nursing program concurrent with home and family responsibilities. They also clarified the point that the graduates of the hospital program need not repeat all their practical experience, as testing for proficiency credits is available.

The changes of interest in education careers are not really highlighted on Table I. Generally, the pre-course response was to merely state the general field of education as an interest, while following the course all listed specific areas including many new specialities. Many of the women shifted into the educational field after analyzing the benefits derived from this area of work, both personal, convenience and security, and upon discovery of new fields of specialization beyond the confinement of the classroom situation. Several of the women had not wanted to return to the regimentation of the classroom after several years of confinement and schedules in home and family life. For many who were feeling the "time press," education careers were the shortest route for re-entry into employment, and the benefits often outweighed the common complaint against "Oh, those education courses!"

Academic plans. The most significant change occurred with the group of women who upon entering the course were undecided as to their goals, or even

more specifically if an educational goal was for them. A marked increase (36 per cent to 59 per cent) was noted as to the women aspiring to a bachelors degree program. At the end of the course, 14 per cent had decided that continuing education, at this point in their life, was not the answer to their goal search (Table II, page 12).

A concentrated effort was made to advise the women of an appropriate route of entry, as well as a realistic academic load. Many felt that since they had carried 18 or 22 credit hours as a younger student, that was the credit load they would or should be required to take. After being acquainted with the part-time option, and with the difference in fee structure, and with a strong directive from the instructor, many of the women adjusted their planning to begin with a part-time program and gradually assume more of an academic load as the thinking power was once again re-gearred and adjustment to re-entry has been made. All the women were extremely time conscious so that even the delay in starting part-time for one quarter was hard to accept. A shift from 38 per cent to 54 per cent is noted for those who choose to enroll in part-time programs, while none of the students opted for a full-time program. As one of the students philosophized, "I'll wade in, not dive."

The somewhat confusing tally of 46 per cent reflects the group that as yet was not certain as to the time of re-entry, thus it was unrealistic for them to project a schedule load (Table III, page 12).

Actual commitment in volunteer, employment or educational activity.

The three classes were surveyed at 6 months, 1 and 2 year intervals (Table IV, page 12a). Recalling the initial difference in purpose of the first class as having an emphasis on all three of the avenues open to women for involvement outside the home, it is interesting to note that the actual reported changes in activities showed an almost even distribution in these areas. Although the volunteer involvement had decreased considerably with all three classes, this reflects not only the trend nationally, but reflects the

TABLE II
ACADEMIC PLANS OF CLASS MEMBERS

ACADEMIC ASPIRATIONS	ASPIRATIONS PRIOR TO COURSE	ASPIRATIONS AFTER COURSE
Undecided	47	16 *
Technical school	3	2
Bachelors degree	36	59 *
Masters degree	11	9
Ph.D.	3	0
No degree work	0	14 *

* Denotes significant change

TABLE III
ACADEMIC SCHEDULE PREFERENCE OF
CLASS ENROLLEES

EDUCATION PROGRAM	BEFORE CLASS	AFTER CLASS
Part-time	38 %	54%
Full-time	14 %	0%
Undecided	48%	46%

TABLE IV

EDUCATION, VOLUNTEER, AND EMPLOYMENT ACTIVITY CHANGE
SIX MONTHS, ONE AND TWO YEARS FOLLOWING
CLASS EXPERIENCE

INVOLVEMENT	PRIOR TO COURSE	6 MONTHS AFTER	1 YEAR AFTER	2 YEARS AFTER
EDUCATION	3%	* 44%	52%	33%
VOLUNTEER	76%	* 39%	24%	39%
EMPLOYMENT	21%	13%	24%	28%
OTHER	0	4%	0	0

*Denotes significant change

TABLE V

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS
COMPARED WITH TYPICAL AGED STUDENTS

GROUP	GRADE POINT AVERAGE (4.0 Maximum)
Adult Women	3.16
All University (Men and Women)	2.55*
All University (Women)	2.56 **
Sorority	2.74
Fraternity	2.52
All University (Men)	2.41 **

* Fall Quarter, 1969

** Available only up to Spring Quarter, 1967

patterns of women's lives that are currently emerging.

The most marked change in activity is in the increased number of women enrolled in educational programs. Where as only 3 per cent were engaged in education immediately prior to the course, 44 per cent, 52 per cent and 33 per cent respectively had moved into involvement in this area. The discrepancy between the second and third classes (6 months and 1 year) may be that the last class had just completed the course a few days prior to the admission deadline for the following quarter, and that their immediate enrollment would have meant travel during the worst weather months. As was noted with the first two classes, many had to let the course "jell" for several months prior to making a decision. In completing the tabulation, it was noted that many of the same women who were returning to education were also the ones still continuing in their volunteer activities, while the women involved in employment had curtailed their volunteer activities.

Academic achievement. One of the stereotypes most frequently used against adult women returning to higher education is that they cannot compete academically with the younger students. A comparison of the grade point average of the women who had been enrolled in the non-credit educational exploration courses and later matriculated at Ohio State with the All University, sorority, fraternity, men and women's grade point average is interesting. In each category of comparison, the returning adult woman student's academic achievement is noticeably above that of the other groups of typical aged undergraduates (Table V, page 12a).

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING AND PROGRAMMING

The counseling conducted with these women was "reality-based," and involved a great deal of just listening, acting as a sounding board, much information giving, and support during decision making. Several stages were readily

apparent in counseling with the adult women, some of which occurred prior to the counseling session. For convenience of discussion I have divided these into three broad categories.

First, most women prior to counseling have reached a readiness stage, a gradual awareness that something more is needed to motivate them following the busy years of home and family. Lack of interest in bridge, just one more volunteer project, many busy activities yet nothing adding toward a constructive goal, all culminate in the woman keeping her antenna out for new and interesting possible "next steps." This readiness stage is entered into not only by the wife, but by the husband and children as well. In sensing the restlessness and change in the wife or mother, the other family members can either support or destroy her attempts at searching for a solution. Without their support and encouragement her attempts will be thwarted and end in total frustration or separation from family interests. In fact, I feel the most basic factor for a women's successful re-entry into education and consequently later employment is the positive attitude of her husband. This is extremely needed at this time for there must be a security base to permit the woman inner-freedom to launch on her search in an openminded manner. (2,3)

The exploration stage involves information acquiring and researching into the opportunities and options available. This is often found in courses as described previously in this paper, through testing, or counseling, or independent and self-assistance. If counseling is available, the counselor at this point must provide great support and encouragement, not only to reinforce that this woman does have a place and can still contribute in ways other than through her home and family, but that she is acting quite normally in searching for an additional goal direction.

At this point the woman is extremely motivated toward setting a definite goal, yet without adequate information and security in herself, she has been

unable to define this goal. To a time conscious adult this is frustrating not to know ones own mind and be self-directing. After all, she is an adult and at this stage in life one cannot act like a typical college freshman and not know what she wants to major in. Having all those additional years of life experience she certainly should be more self-directing than her adolescent student colleagues. The adult women are also concerned with competition with the younger students and as an adult can't risk failure.

The feeling that she will be the only adult student in all 40,000 at the University is a threat to the most secure person who is not considering a major change in life style. It is amazing how effective a few facts and figures are, such as citing that 1,500 women over the age of 25 are continuing their education in credit courses at Ohio State. It is also reassuring to know that education combines more easily with home and family responsibilities than does employment, that one can always, if need be, stay home with a sick child and borrow the lecture notes from a colleague, or clean house during a quarter break, or enjoy the flexibility that education allows versus the confining, set hours of employment.

All these factors of extreme goal motivation, time press, lack of information, and insecurity set up a field of confusion, thus not permitting the adult woman to think clearly of her goals and directions. As many of the women describe it, "It's a vicious circle, I can't counsel myself out of it."

The final stage, if we can say there is one in viewing life on a developmental basis, is that of action. Even here the adult woman student needs supportive counseling and reassurance not only from the counselor, but especially from the other adult women students as well. At this stage particularly, the women can assist each other in analyzing their motivations for returning to college and sharing the "tips of the trade" for survival. As one adult woman said after a coffee hour, "You folks certainly provide some life rafts along the way."

The description of guilt feelings of adult women in returning to school has been explored from the standpoint of using the family's money for her own education, and/or in breaking from the socially prescribed role that the wife's place is in the home to serve and support the interests of her family above all else. But doubly complicating these guilt feelings are the feelings of enjoyment and accomplishment in renewed involvement that an adult woman finds in returning to education. She becomes quite concerned since she is thwarting the previously set social mores, and still enjoying her adventure.

In the majority of my counseling cases, I have found it a definite advantage to be a woman and to have combined many of these roles that the adult counselee is anticipating. I do not mean to imply that a male counselor could not have created the same opportunity to explore feelings and concerns, but just the fact that I had undertaken some of these problems and survived, was an additional support.

In conclusion, the scope of our program at Ohio State is much broader than indicated from the single illustration of our non-credit courses. Briefly, we have a three phase program including (1) a pre-admission, "starter-point" service for the adult student who needs a brief conference, information and referral to offices and resources on campus, (2) the supportive services for those adult women students currently enrolled which include quarterly coffee hours, luncheon seminars, and counseling; and, (3) an opportunity for the typical age undergraduate women students to receive counseling and information on the changing life styles of women. (Outline of services available on request).

In general, this has been an overview of the changes in attitudes and plans of 83 adult women students enrolled in a non-credit educational, "next-step" exploration course. This has been just one example of many such programs across the country and one that I hope has illustrated the value of such an educational endeavor for both the institution and for the women who have been a part of this experience.

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